

NOTEBOOKS

FAQ

Q I plan to use my notebook while abroad. Is there anything I need to consider before I leave?

A Charging your notebook shouldn't be an issue. Most power supplies can accept 100-240V at 50 or 60Hz, but check the label to make sure. If it's rated as above, you can charge it anywhere.

Carrying a notebook through airport security has become harder recently. You might be asked to switch it on to prove it's a working PC rather than something more sinister.

Using a notebook on a plane is permitted, but you should deactivate your wireless network adaptor. You can do this by going to Network Connections in Windows and right-clicking on the adaptor.

While overseas, remember that your warranty might not provide service outside the UK. Check with your manufacturer before you travel. Also ensure that you have sufficient travel insurance to cover the value of your notebook in case it gets lost or damaged.

Seth Barton

Notebooks and video expert

seth@computersshopper.co.uk



EUROTRACKING Computrace Plus

★★★★★

EXCLUSIVE

From £20 a year inc VAT



Imagine a company that can track your notebook computer wherever it goes in the world. As soon as it connects to the internet, whether by modem or broadband, the company can trace it to an actual address. This isn't a scary Big Brother-type scenario to keep us all under surveillance, but a rather useful service for recovering your notebook if it's lost or stolen.

You can install the Computrace agent on your notebook or have it pre-installed by the manufacturer. HP, Dell, IBM and Gateway all offer to pre-install the agent in the BIOS. However, you can easily install the agent to any notebook or PC using a disc. You can think of the agent as a benevolent virus, and like a virus it's designed to be hard to remove.

We received the Computrace agent on an HP notebook. A potential thief would be completely unaware that the agent is installed, as it doesn't show itself in Windows. EuroTracking challenged us to remove the agent, so we formatted the hard disk and completely reinstalled Windows XP. Impressively, the agent survived. When pre-loaded into the BIOS, it can even survive the complete replacement of the hard disk.

We connected the notebook to our office network and gave it time to report in. We then logged on to the Computrace customer centre, where you can find out when your notebook last reported to the centre. This also gives the machine's public and local IP addresses.

If you report the notebook to the customer centre as lost, it starts reporting every 15 minutes. The IP information is passed to the appropriate ISP, which can then trace the notebook back to an



individual subscriber. This gives police a postal address to investigate where, hopefully, they will recover your notebook. Recovery rates are currently at over 90 per cent for notebooks that successfully report in.

We took the notebook home and used it on our ADSL connection there. Even without ISP or police assistance, the staff from EuroTracking could tell us who our ISP was and our rough location. The company has tracked notebooks all the way to Nigeria in the past.

If you store sensitive data on your notebook, you can also opt for Computrace Complete (£100 including VAT for three years). The main benefit of this service is that EuroTracking can remotely delete sensitive data from your notebook. You have to pay a little extra to do this and pricing is available on application. You also get £500 worth of insurance, which is paid out if your notebook can't be recovered. Complete is useful for network administrators, too, as you can include

multiple notebooks in one account.

This is an excellent, well-priced service that worked really well in our tests. The Plus version is probably the best option for most people, but the service is best suited to those who regularly carry a notebook around and want complete peace of mind.

Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ☒ Helps police find your notebook
- ☒ Extra features for system admins
- ☒ Only worthwhile for mobile users

ANTI-THEFT SOFTWARE Requires a notebook PC
SUPPLIER EuroTracking 01635 247100
DETAILS www.eurotracking.eu.com

Also consider...

HP Pavilion dv5094EA

★★★★★

£749 inc VAT

PRICE CUT!



HP's Pavilion dv5094EA notebook won our £799 group test in *Shopper* May 2006. It's a great notebook for use around the home. The chassis is well built and the keyboard and touch pad are both a pleasure to use. The display is outstanding: it's bright and reproduces colours accurately.

The Pavilion has a good range of ports, including a memory card reader, which is very convenient for digital camera users. Inside there's a massive 100GB hard disk for storage plus a DVD writer for backups. It performed respectably in our *Shopper* benchmarks, scoring strongly in our image-manipulation test. Battery life is just over three hours, which is easily enough for use around the home. It's not equipped to play the latest games, though. This notebook is well



designed and provides more than enough power for day-to-day tasks. It's particularly suitable for anyone with an interest in digital photography.

NOTEBOOK PC 2.0GHz AMD Turion 64 ML-37, 1GB RAM, 100GB hard disk, ATI Mobility Radeon Xpress 200 graphics, DVD+/-RW DL, 15.4" widescreen LCD, weighs 3.1kg SUPPLIER www.comet.co.uk PART CODE ET038EA#ABU DETAILS www.hp.com/uk ☒ Great display; good input devices; huge hard disk ☒ Big chassis FULL REVIEW May 2006

EVESHAM Voyager C550

★★★★★

£1,149 inc VAT

It may have an Evesham badge on its lid, but the Voyager C550 is actually an Asus A6 in disguise. The chassis has had a makeover, with a bright silver colour scheme and the removal of Asus's trademark metal touch pad surround, but in all other respects it's identical, with the same strengths and weaknesses as the A6VM in last month's Labs.

The chassis is deep for a widescreen notebook and the lid looks as if it could fit a standard 4:3-ratio display instead. This give you plenty of space to rest your palms while typing. The excellent keyboard has firm keys that provide good feedback. The touch pad is accurate and correctly proportioned to the screen, and the buttons below it are well made and responsive.

Below the touch pad is a series of handy short-cut keys for playing audio and video files. These extend past the lid when it's shut, and you can use them to play CDs directly without launching Windows. Unfortunately, the built-in speakers sound a little flat. This isn't helped by their position on the lower front of the chassis, where they point down towards the desk.

The 15.4" gloss display coped excellently in all our tests. The white wasn't incredibly bright, but it was very clean with no tint or backlighting problems. The colour test looked fabulous, and the greyscale test was well balanced. Mounted above is a webcam for use in web chat sessions. It's a great display that does justice to movies, games and photos.

The excellent display is certainly required, as Evesham has installed Windows Media Center Edition. This is becoming quite common, and it's a move we applaud. It offers a great streamlined interface for enjoying



photos and audio files, and you have the option of adding an inexpensive TV tuner to take advantage of its excellent EPG and PVR functions. The 100GB hard disk provides sufficient storage for all these files, too.

There's more entertainment to be had from the capable ATI Radeon Mobility X1600 graphics chipset. It scored well in our tough Doom 3 test and will cope with any current game, although you may have to reduce detail levels to get demanding titles to run.

Application performance is impressive thanks to

the combination of an Intel Core Duo T2400 processor and 1GB of RAM. The dual-core processor made short work of our processor-intensive video test, while the RAM helped give an impressive score in our memory-intensive image test. With an overall score of 127 in our new benchmarks, it's easily fast enough for even the toughest tasks.

The Voyager C550 is a powerful notebook that has something for everyone in terms of entertainment. It isn't cheap, though, so you'd need to make full use of its capabilities to justify the price.

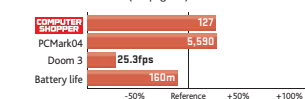
Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Impressive application performance
- ✓ Media Center Edition installed
- ✗ Poor speakers

NOTEBOOK PC 1.83GHz Intel Core Duo T2400, 1GB RAM, 100GB hard disk, 256MB ATI Radeon Mobility X1600 graphics, DVD+/-RW DL drive, 15.4" LCD screen, weighs 2.9kgs
SUPPLIER Evesham 08716 661616
DETAILS www.evesham.com

PERFORMANCE (see page 60)



BYTE SIZE

PLANON DocuPen RC800

★★★

£200 inc VAT



Some flatbed scanners are light enough to carry around, but even the smallest are larger than a notebook PC. Planon's DocuPen RC800 is a portable pen scanner that's easier to take on the road. It weighs under 60g and is as long as a sheet of A4 paper is wide.

To scan with the RC800 you simply turn it on, select a resolution and colour mode and roll it across your document. Images are stored in its 8MB memory for later transfer to a PC over a TWAIN interface. The scanner is easy to use and its image quality is acceptable for basic office scans, but it feels decidedly flimsy and basic for the price.

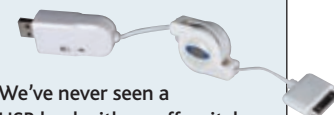
Simon Handby

SUPPLIER www.scanningpens.co.uk
DETAILS www.planon.com

IXOS XMI305

★★★

£9 inc VAT



We've never seen a USB lead with an off switch before, so IXOS can claim at least one first for its iPod dock cable. The switch in question is stiff to move and seems to disable the entire cable. Most people would find it more useful if it stopped data transfer while keeping the USB power connected, as this would enable the iPod to charge without iTunes taking control of it. As it is, simply unplugging it from the PC is quicker and easier.

The cable is retractable, but it's no more compact than the standard Apple lead when coiled and it feels more fragile. It's not much cheaper than the official lead, either, so it doesn't seem worthwhile.

Simon Handby

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.ixos.co.uk

ACER Aspire 5672WLMi

★★★★★

£1,130 inc VAT

PRICE CUT!



Acer's 5672WLMi was the first notebook we've seen with an Intel Core Duo processor.

This new dual-core processor makes it one of the fastest notebooks available. When running simultaneous applications it really shines, eclipsing the performance of equivalent Pentium M notebooks.

The rest of the specification is equally impressive. There's a generous 2GB of RAM and a huge 120GB hard disk. The ATI Mobility Radeon X1400 is good enough for playing the odd game and the 15.4" widescreen display is bright and colourful.

The chassis is quite slim, especially given all the power it contains, and weighs less than 3kg. Battery life is impressive, too, making the Aspire



5672WLMi an ideal notebook for those who want plenty of performance while they're on the move. If you want a deluxe notebook with tons of processing power, then it's ideal.

NOTEBOOK PC 1.66GHz Intel Core Duo T2300, 2GB RAM, 120GB hard disk, 256MB ATI Mobility Radeon X1400 graphics, DVD+/-RW DL drive, 15.4" LCD screen, weighs 2.95kg PART CODE LX.A8505.026 SUPPLIER www.acernotebooks.co.uk, 0870 167 0819 DETAILS www.acer.co.uk
✓ Latest dual-core processor, excellent 2D performance ✗ Graphics performance not as good FULL REVIEW Apr 2006

BYTE SIZE

FREECOM ToughDrive XXS 6GB

★★★★
£108 inc VAT



FreeCom's ToughDrive XXS is a pocket-sized hard disk about the size of a lighter. Its appearance isn't to our taste, but it feels sturdy. A flexible USB connector is tucked away in a crevice at the top of the unit, although a USB extension cord is included for plugging it into recessed ports.

The included compression, synchronisation and password protection software is useful, but it's nothing you can't find elsewhere. The read/write performance is in line with what we would expect. Unfortunately the ToughDrive is pricy. Similar products, such as Seagate's 5GB USB 2.0 Pocket Hard Drive, are available for around £65.

Alan Lu

SUPPLIER www.macwarehouse.co.uk
DETAILS www.freecom.com

TANGLE TAMERS i-spring

★★★
£5.99 inc VAT



Numerous companies stick an 'i' on the front of their product names in an attempt to convince iPod owners to buy them. Tangle Tamers is the latest firm to try this trick with its i-spring. The product is two thin springs, available in a range of colours, that you wrap around your in-ear headphone cables.

Their rigidity means you should never get your headphones tangled again. However, before we even managed to get the i-spring on our test headphones we'd got them tangled together.

Once on, they look fine, but the springs make the cables unwieldy. You'll also need a skin for your MP3 player to stop the springs scratching it.

They're cheap, but we're not convinced that tangled cables are that big a problem.

David Ludlow

SUPPLIER Tangle Tamers 0116 247 8807
DETAILS www.tangletamers.com

DELL Inspiron 9400

★★★★
£1,549 inc VAT

Dell's desktop-replacement Inspiron 9400 is not the prettiest notebook. The sheer girth of its chassis detracts from the styling, although the white trim will blend in with any iPod-style accessories you may have.

The chassis is fitted with an excellent array of ports. There are six USB2 ports, which is the most we've ever seen on a notebook. It also has a card reader that supports SD, MMC, MS and xD formats. Seven short-cut buttons on the front of the chassis control audio and video playback.

Windows Media Center Edition is installed as standard, so you can take advantage of easy access to your audio, photo and video files. You could even add a compatible USB TV tuner and turn the computer into a personal video recorder (PVR).

The 17" widescreen display is bright and displayed very smooth greyscales in our image tests. Unusually for an entertainment PC, the screen doesn't have a gloss finish to increase contrast and improve blacks. Its anti-glare coating isn't essential for use around the home and leaves the screen looking grainy. What's more, it has a distinctly red hue, so colour-sensitive work is out. It's a disappointing screen, especially for a Media Center notebook.

Sound is far better, though, and the speakers built into the front of the chassis produce some very respectable and loud audio. They are fine for watching TV and listening to music, although you may want something with more bass for action movies.

The keyboard has a fair amount of travel, but the keys aren't firm enough, so typing soon becomes tiring. The keyboard is a decent size, though, and allows for full-size keys.



The touch pad is accurate and has convenient scroll bars on the side and bottom. The buttons below have a bit too much travel, but you get used to them.

3D graphics power from Intel's GMA 950 chipset is minimal and will cope with older games only. Application performance is far more impressive, though. The Intel Core Duo T2600 runs at a speedy 2.16GHz and, paired with 1GB of RAM, it managed a stunning *Shopper* benchmark score. It's the fastest

notebook we've seen so far, which is not surprising as this is the first time we've come across Intel's fastest Core Duo processor. However, this processor adds a hefty premium to the price, and we feel a T2400 or T2300 processor would have been more cost-effective.

Dell includes a three-year warranty with this model, which will provide plenty of peace of mind, particularly to novice users. This Inspiron 9400 is a very fast notebook, but its display and keyboard let it down, so we can't recommend it.

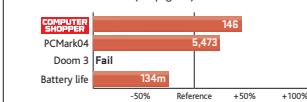
Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent application performance
- ✗ Expensive given lack of 3D graphics
- ✗ Poor display and keyboard

NOTEBOOK PC 2.16GHz Intel Core Duo T2600, 1GB RAM, 100GB hard disk, Intel GMA 950 graphics, DVD+/-RW DL drive, 17" LCD screen, weighs 3.6kg
PART CODE E-Value code PPUK5-N03946R
SUPPLIER Dell 08701 524699
DETAILS www.dell.com/uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 60)



Also consider...

ROCK Xtreme CT 2.0GHz

★★★★
£1,408 inc VAT

Rock's Xtreme CT 2.0GHz lets you play the latest games without the need for a bulky desktop computer. The nVidia GeForce Go 7800 GTX graphics chipset provides blistering frame rates in all the latest and most demanding titles. It stormed through our standard Doom 3 test with a score of 85.2fps. The excellent 17" widescreen display works best with compatible titles such as Call of Duty 2.

The Xtreme CT 2.0GHz features a fast 2GHz Pentium M processor and 1GB of RAM, which helped it achieve a respectable 92 overall in our benchmarks. The 60GB hard disk is a little on the small side, though, so you'll have to delete unused games

regularly. The battery life is a paltry 95 minutes, but that's to be expected when you have this much graphical muscle. The Rock is a well-designed and powerful notebook that is ideal for gamers.



NOTEBOOK PC 2GHz Intel Pentium M 760, 1GB RAM, 60GB hard disk, nVidia GeForce Go 7800 GTX graphics, DVD+/-RW DL, 17" widescreen
SUPPLIER Rock Direct 08709 909090 DETAILS www.rockdirect.com LCD PART CODE XCT-2.0
Great 3D performance, excellent 17" widescreen Small hard disk FULL REVIEW Feb 2006

BYTE SIZE

TERRATEC Grabster AV 150

★★★
£50 inc VAT



Terratec's Grabster AV 150 lets you capture analogue video to your PC. It connects using USB2 and has composite and S-video inputs, so you can hook up most camcorders or VCRs.

Capturing video is simple, but you'll need a sound card if you want to capture audio as well. Terratec supplies the full version of Ulead's DVD MovieFactory 3, which you can use to edit video and burn the results to DVD. Video quality depends entirely on your source material.

This is a well thought out device that would benefit from audio support. But many analogue and hybrid TV tuners can do the same job for a similar price, and they can show TV as well.

Seth Barton

SUPPLIER www.euro-tech.co.uk
DETAILS <http://uk.terratec.net>

HELA USB Massage Ball

★★★
£8.95 inc VAT



After a hard day of PC use, what could be better than soothing those sore limbs with a USB Massage Ball? It may look like a child's toy, but plug it into a USB port, hit the button on the back and it vibrates at high speed. Simply touch the blue nodules to your body and let the massager do the rest.

For hands and arms, it feels OK and could help with stiff joints. Touch it to your head, though, and it's deeply unpleasant, as the hard blue nodules are painful. It feels as though your brain is slowly being shaken loose from your skull.

It might not be quite as good as a proper masseur, but for less than a tenner, it's not a bad novelty gift.

David Ludlow

SUPPLIER www.loadsmorestuff.com
DETAILS www.hela.co.uk

CHOOSING A... Notebook Computer

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

PROCESSOR: AMD Mobile Sempron 3000+
MEMORY: 512MB DDR
HARD DISK: 40GB
STORAGE: DVDewriter
GRAPHICS: Integrated (using system memory)
SCREEN: 1,024x768 LCD
EXTRAS: Wireless networking
CONNECTORS: Three USB2, network, modem
SOFTWARE: Windows XP Home Edition
WEIGHT: 3kg
Recommended minimum in grey

1 The minimum specification of notebook we recommend, shown above in grey, is a good starting point when working out your ideal system. This is an average notebook that should cost around £600. It is not particularly powerful or, at 3kg, particularly portable. Mobile processors increase the battery life and are now fairly common, even at this price.

2 Most people want a better notebook than the bare minimum – but what is your definition of better? Do you want something that's more powerful, or lighter and better-looking? Desktop replacement notebooks, which approach the power of a full-size PC, are necessarily large to accommodate the extras. These usually include a desktop processor and larger battery to keep the whole lot running for any length of time.

3 If portability is your main priority, keep the specification modest (a Pentium M 1.7GHz, say) but spend more. This will buy you an executive notebook with the kind of cutting-edge design required to miniaturise without compromising usability. Clever chassis, expensive batteries and the finest materials are prerequisites for superior ultra-portable notebooks.

4 There are features you can add to a notebook without piling on weight or reducing battery life. A 60GB, 80GB or 100GB hard disk and 1GB of RAM won't hurt. Another possibility is an external drive that you can carry with you or leave at home according to the nature of your trip. Some ultra-portables can attach to an optional docking station, which incorporates drives, ports and extra power for when you need it. It's the best of both worlds, but tends to be expensive.

5 If you're not swayed by ultra-portable chic, you can get a lot more for your money. Today's desktop replacements pile on the features but still keep the price under £1,200. Alternatively, go for a balanced package: middling power and price in a reasonably portable package. Which notebook you pick depends on how much power and which features you need, so consider each in turn.

6 Notebooks run the same software as desktop PCs, so our advice on the core specification is the same (see page 14). However, hard disks go up to only 120GB and even the best notebook graphics lag slightly behind desktops.

7 DVDewriter drives are now standard and will allow you to burn CDs and DVDs on the move. If you want to watch movies, consider buying a notebook with a widescreen display.

8 A 1,024x768 screen is the entry level these days, but its size will depend on the notebook's purpose. Ultra-portables might have screens as small as 9". Widescreen displays have resolutions of 1,200x768 upwards but make for a bulkier notebook.

9 A modem and regular 10/100 Ethernet port should come as standard. We also consider wireless 802.11b or 802.11g networking (WiFi) to be essential, and it's becoming increasingly popular on all models. FireWire (IEEE-1394) and Bluetooth can be added to the default TV out and USB2 ports. Memory card readers are extremely common, so check that your camera or MP3 player's format is supported.

10 Once you're happy with your specification, start to shortlist some models you can afford. Check the weight and battery life of each of them. If these are not acceptable, you need to reconsider how much power and which features you really need.

